Paul Freundlich

Deus ex Machina

or

What Does Time Mean to a Pig?

a novel

Randolph Caspar
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Dedicated to
Margaret Flinter,
relentless editor, comrade, and love
and
Max,
intrepid hunter, comrade, and cat
In the fall of 1999, the millennium was approaching like a missile launched from a 2000 year-old slingshot. Portents of global warming, punctures of the ozone layer, depletion of the rain forest vied with Luddite predictions about the incipient crash of technology.

Celebrations were scheduled around the world for an event of high significance to the culture of the dominant market economy. Ironically, nations, peoples and religions were included for whom the Christian calendar was somewhere between irrelevance and insult.

In London, the gathering drama was matched by a lowering sky, heavy rain with intimations of snow, and a mist that obscured all but the worst intentions.

Joshua Leyden was in town for an international symposium. The subject, defining standards governing worldwide exploitation of child labor, brought together representatives of business and labor, governments, human rights and religious groups.

The organization Dr. Leyden headed in the United States, Community Futures, was a leader in defining the proposed standards. The documentary they had produced on the subject would be shown tomorrow at the opening plenary.

Leyden was running through his framing remarks to his friend Allison, who was plumped in a cozy chair by the fire.

“Companies run from one country to another in search of cheap labor and wide-open access to resources. When profitability feeds on communities at risk, a fragile planetary ecology, and millions of virtually helpless workers, many of them children, it is up to activists and consumers to make sure recalcitrant companies pay the price...

“Then the houselights dim, and the video begins – not surprisingly titled, Paying the Price.”

Joshua offered a mock bow as Allison clapped enthusiastically.

“Bravo! If your documentary is as good as the preamble, it should be a huge success.”
“I’m afraid it’s mostly talk so far,” he sighed. “Unless there’s teeth to the agreements, it’s too easy for everyone to look soulful. After all, who’s going to stand up for, *Exploiting children? Can’t get ‘em too young. Young is cheap. Cheap is good. Wear ‘em out? Who cares? There’s always more.*

They were sitting in the parlor of Allison’s comfortable Hempstead home, where he usually stayed when he was in town. Leyden sipped his tea as Allison went to the bookcase and searched without success.

“There was a book written in the mid-’70s I thought we had. It related China’s population control to equitable distribution of resources. Now they’ve entered the modern world and busy exploiting children, too.”

Back in the chair, Allison waggled a sneaker. “And here I am, a contented consumer wearing my Chinese shoes from Nasty Nike.”

Joshua admired Allison’s legs.

She noticed and laughed. “Haven’t you given up on me yet?”

“Not till the day I die, and maybe not even then.”

Allison smiled complacently. “Well, I love you, too, so I suppose it’s all right. But speaking of love, if I don’t go to bed soon, Neil’s going to be seriously annoyed.”

Before she went upstairs, Allison put a light hand on his shoulder. “Soyez courage, mon ami. At our age, a certain level of skepticism is probably appropriate, especially given the state of the world. What’s remarkable is that you’re still trying.”

Leyden brought his cup to the kitchen, pausing at a framed picture of Allison’s father in the hall. The photograph had been taken thirty years before at the Nobel Prize ceremonies in Stockholm.

*I wonder if he’d have any thoughts about population. Medicine’s been such a huge part of the exponential growth. It’s all out of balance. If I could go back and present him with the situation, I wonder what he’d say? Then laughed at himself. Probably that he had a long day tomorrow, and time for sleep.*

Later, Joshua lay in bed thinking of Allison and other choices he might have made, his own mix of success and frustration, the effort required to struggle against the tides of history, the pretty Dutch woman who would be at the conference tomorrow, and wasn’t he getting a little old for that sort of thing? Silly man, foolish humans, lucky to be alive and life still matters....

*And so he drifted into sleep and dreams.*
He is on the podium of the opening plenary.
The room darkens, as the first images of their video are projected on the big screen. Extreme close-up of water dripping from a tap. A child’s eye, blinking. A redwood tree crashing down a clear-cut slope. A telephoto compression of cars bumpered up on a freeway. A jittery, hand-held sequence of exhausts and emissions — and banging in, the chords of Dan Fogelberg’s song, “Blind to the Truth.”

The crisis we’ve created
With our self-indulgent ways
Living like there’s no tomorrow
Well, that might just be the case

The title is spray painted on a wall. The wall dissolves to a village in the Andes, a street in Thailand, a slum in Nairobi. It is barely past dawn. Trucks arriving. Sleepy children thrust into vehicles, headed for the factories where they will spend the next twelve hours.

The first voices and narration begin.
Josh is gripped by the flow, a building sense of excitement as he watches the intense concentration of the audience. But something is wrong with the projection — the images and sound jumbled. Confusion rising.

If two trains run side-by-side, for that moment, the passengers, staring out the windows, share their common passage.
If two trains pass in opposite directions, there is a blur of faces, and the moment too brief and abrupt for recognition.
Consider two trains heading in opposite directions, but stopped in a station. While both trains wait, it is possible to change between them. Transferring passengers would then head back down their own timelines, reviewing past images incrementally.
So it is with memory. So it is with dreams.
Part One

Deus ex Machina

Life and death, immortal soul
Each seeks a pre-conditioned goal
Time and space are surely one
As around the clock we run
A gang of boys and girls playing in the woods back of school, inventing daring simian games on the limbs of giant trees.

Josh and his girl, his first girl, are always in touch. Gloria stumbles and he catches, holding hands a moment more, pledged without doubt or intention.

The season changes, leaves turned to shades of brown and umber. Josh and Gloria alone in the woods.

Gloria seems older, the beginning of curves to her straight, young body. They look deep into each other’s eyes. For the first time, a shy kiss.

Embracing, her eyes widen in surprise at his sudden hardness, then a glint of eagerness. Gloria leans back against a tree and he presses his erection against the thin cloth of her skirt, thrusting upwards.

She meets his motion, cries his name. He is weeping with pleasure, waking up.

Even as the dream faded, Oh, the sweetness...

His first waking awareness: Is that what she’d be like now? Not the sex, blushing at the enormity of the thought, but there was so much feeling. Would it be the same, if Gloria hadn’t moved away? I wish there was someone like that in my life now.

A second awareness, more tangible. Sticky sheets and belly – his first wet dream. A mess, but what a milestone in his life!

And then,
a dam overflowing
a wave overwhelming
Fifty years, a whole life exploding in his brain.
The perspective of himself in 1999
staggering match with twelve-years-old
Adolescence
college
work
relationships
world events
ordinary, outrageous
experience and observations competing for attention.
No!
Like a raft in rapids, hurtling through narrow passages. Vistas
opened and closed, perspective shifted. Knowing nothing and every-
thing. Lacking another point of focus, only his cascading mind and
physical self.
Save me, I'm drowning...
Babbling internal dialog, flat on his back, staring up at the uni-
verse, but all he saw was the ceiling – a white window to anywhere.
Stop it.
Stop it all.
Opened his eyes again. The hands of the clock were moving
relentlessly.
Time is tick ticking and I am slip slipping.
Staggered to the dresser mirror to see a young boy's face and body.
No question of when he was in time, yet what of the dense and over-
lapping compilation of memories?
Legs buckling under him.
Josh sat down on the bed, took a deep breath.
Huff and puff, but the house is already blown down.
The image of a small wave heading into shore, overwhelmed by a
freak breaker towering over the beach. Were his memories the wave –
both waves? Was he a surfer, bailing out?
Josh curled into his pillow, pulled the covers around.
Get a grip.
A dream? Momentarily wake in a bed three thousand miles and
half a century away, with Allison and Neil downstairs making break-
fast? The twelve-year-old memories some weird synaptic explosion of
his sublimated past?
He calmed. That had to be it. Just close my eyes, blank my mind,
wait it out.
Several minutes passed. The rapid thud of his heartbeat returned
to a more normal pace. That's a relief. Don't think. He almost drifted
back to sleep.
The flashing thought, But that's absurd, if I'm already asleep and
dreaming.
Eyelids flickered, and light poured in through the dormer win-
dows of his childhood bedroom. Same furniture. Same twelve-year-old
body. This is getting serious!
Consider the alternatives:
Most obvious: I've gone crazy.
Unlikely. No history of breakdowns, and in spite of a rich fantasy
life, Josh trusted his stability. Even now, with stomach churning and mind spinning, he was into problem solving mode.

*An aneurysm.*

During the split second when the clot reached the brain, all this was happening like that Ambrose Bierce story, “Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.” He’d snap back to a dead present in the Hempstead house.

*Alien possession.*

Okay, if he was in thrall to greater powers, that took him off the hook.

*My mind has simply dropped back fifty years.*

That whole world going on without him. *Whatever happened to Dr. Leyden? Can't imagine who you're talking about.*

As he lay exploring contradictions, without volition, the two sets of memories grafted as a seamless history – past of twelve years, future of the next fifty, now as the present point of contact and resolution.

He heard his parents talking in the hall. His father, from one perspective dead for twenty-five years, and his mother – if he were twelve, she would be in her thirties. A wave of pure amazement almost swept him out the door.

Given the normal tone of their voices, it was life as usual. Their son gushing about miraculous transformations? No way.

With dawning wonder, Josh returned to the mirror, patted his stomach. Flat. Been in reasonably good condition for a sixty-year-old, but this was a major improvement. Even his bellybutton was back to an outie. Decades of rich foods and good eating disappeared. There was a quick way to make a million: *Guaranteed to lose weight. Not only will you feel younger, you'll be younger!*

Skittering on the edge of hysteria, he took another deep breath and resumed his inventory: About five foot two, slender, blue eyes, light brown hair, high cheekbones. There was a fey quality, but now behind it, a focus and intensity that would need to be masked.

*How does this work? Do I know the future?*

Maybe everything would be different: Aliens appear in the sky, Third World War, a worse plague than AIDS.

At the other extreme, trapped in the original set of experiences, a passive and frustrated observer, yelling inside his head, *No, no, don't do that!* Ridiculous. At this very moment, even these trivial actions flowed from his changes.

Would that mean the future he’d known was becoming less substantial? There was a science-fiction story in which a time traveler lands in the Jurassic Period. Steps on some lichen, wipes out a path to the future. Back in his present, the beings who sent him are changing.
Another step and an airborne spore gone. More changes. Well, I'm only back fifty years. It would take a million to have that impact.

Another good one he couldn't reject so quickly: Would it all fade away? Like that story, “Flowers for Algernon,” where extraordinary intelligence deserts the hero. Just have to see.

Assuming it lasts, how does a kid make use of what he knows? Let's see, 1950. Four years before I can even have a driver's license. Josh looked over the objects scattered on shelves and surfaces. Toy cars are more my speed.

Josh had an image of the Golden Gate Bridge. On the Marin side, the sunlight of the present was bright and the edges sharp. Through the fog, the muted outline of the city. Ahead, a toll booth, with some dues to pay.

Oh, yes. Instead of my turbo charged Saab, I'm riding a bicycle. Did I appreciate how much power I had as an adult?

Family, friends and work, all at such a great distance. No one knew and valued him as he was. Nowhere to take an adult’s range of emotion.

I don't even know if I'm alone. Maybe everybody, or everyone my age, is waking up to a not-quite-new day. Well, if so, I'll know soon enough.

His mother tapped on the door. It was morning, a school morning. He was still twelve-years-old. Life wasn't waiting for an explanation.

A sudden illness to buy time? Hell, no! Along with radically expanded experience and wider perspective, there was the sheer energy and enthusiasm of a boy. He thought different than his younger self; he felt different than his older self.

What a trip! Loss and confusions, of course, but instead of a probable three quarters through his life, Josh was nearly at the beginning. If this bizarre twist of the universe held up, with his skills and experience, the sky was the limit. Personal failures reversed. Interventions for himself, his family, country, hell, the goddamn world!

What was that Steve Martin routine? “My first wish is for all the children in the world...” Josh couldn’t remember the rest exactly, only that it rapidly devolved to sex and power. A spiritual challenge, for sure!

Again, a knock on the door. “Honey, don’t dawdle.”

Dawdle? Oh, if you only knew.

Nevertheless, Josh pulled himself together. Time to get up. This kid needs a shower.

Walking out his driveway, Josh passed bicycle tracks embedded in the newly widened street. Last fall, an errant ride through the fresh
concrete left a memorial of his passage. I slipped, therefore I am?

The chill air cutting through his warm jacket was tangible, grounding. Ahead, on the corner of Ridgeway, other kids were already waiting for the school bus. They’re so small, so young! It was a jolt much like that first look in the mirror.

Greetings exchanged. Complaints about the weather. Esther standing aloof, wrapped in her fur collar.

Josh felt a vague kinship, but from his changed perspective, they seemed empty vessels, waiting to be filled. Unless?

Josh ventured, “Boy, did I have a weird dream last night. I was a lot older.”

“Yeah, like in high school?” Fred asked.

“Even older than that.”

“Jeez. Once I dreamed I was playing third base for the Giants. I struck out though.”

Andy chimed in, “You could do that anytime. What’s the point of having dreams, if you can’t do something different?”

Coincidence? Searched the boy for complicity, but found only ingenuous spite. Get a grip!

The bus arrived. They piled down the aisle, hurled themselves into seats, except for Esther, who managed a dainty passage. I remember her in high school, still a princess. Marriage and kids for sure, but what about the ’60s, the Women’s Movement? What surprises in her future?

Other kids were boarding. Bright faces, red with the cold. Shouted greetings.

The camaraderie felt normal, safe, comforting. For the moment, Josh relaxed into his twelve years.


Homeroom. The clothing and hairstyles at once completely normal, and a set piece for a retro movie. Josh shuffled through his books quickly. What to make of courses that were mostly simplistic, but a few demanded specialized computations and memorization?

I’m running a “B” average. Should hold till I get this figured out. Besides, I haven’t forgotten anything. If I just drift, I can answer the obvious questions.

The real question, of course, was how seriously to take this? In a dream there were consequences, too, but they tended towards the erratic.

If I make a weird face at Jenny across the aisle, she thinks I’m crazy and tells her friends, maybe complains to the teacher, or even decides I’m flirting and suddenly we have a thing going. In a dream, he wouldn’t
have to worry about her reactions, simply move to the next focus of his own imagination.

Jenny was a stick of a girl doodling on a pad of paper. What was she writing? He leaned over.

Doris Day and Gregory Peck

Was she matchmaking? Whatever it was followed from her mind, her consciousness, and a reality in which Josh was a minor figure. Let’s keep it that way!

Which led him to thinking about girls in the class. His memories sorted out a few attractions. Janet, three rows over – his first date – what had he seen in her? She’d have to do without his corsage this time around. Cindy, perky, snip of a nose, small breasts poking out of a pink sweater, caught him staring, and gave a dirty look. As he remembered, by ninth grade, Cindy was considered fast. What did that mean for these years?

And what’s the point? These were sub-teenagers, a decade and a half before the sexual revolution of the ‘60s. Holding hands and kissing would be a big deal in this age, at his age. His seventh grade homeroom teacher looked better. Scratch that.

Allison, his favorite person, long-term Lady Fair, was removed by only a few hours of conscious time, yet the gulf between this boy and that woman in England was immense. Could he drop a note to the girl she would be now?

I remember you. Do you remember me?

In English, they were composing letters to famous characters. He dashed one off to Juliet:

Dear Juliet,

Roses are red, violets are blue. If you value your life, to thine own house be true. Beware of that slicker, Romeo. He’s set his capulet for you, and his temperament is decidedly mercutio. Perhaps I’m poisoning your mind, but that’s the least of your danger.

Sincerely,

A friend

No, that’s probably not a good idea.

At recess, an older boy began teasing. Josh remembered how miserable much of this time was. I’m above it now, right? The kid moved in closer and shoved.
Gandhi’s dead and Jesus Christ’s other cheek is long ago turned to dust.

Josh surprised them both by shoving back.

Two of the boy’s friends drifted over. One tripped Josh from behind, and he fell onto the hard-packed dirt. It hurt almost as intensely as the shame washing over.

Through the haze of fear and anger, the striking thought that these were just kids, two generations before sub-teen, suburban vendettas were carried out with semi-automatic weapons. Nothing likely to happen nearly as bad as being bullied.

With a cry of outrage, Josh tackled a pair of legs. The kid lost his balance and they rolled in the dirt.

Josh made it to his feet. A fist banged into the side of his head. Josh bounced away, propelled into the others, and they all crashed to the ground, wrestling.

Twisting away. Stumbling to their feet. Heavy breathing, hard stares and tensing for the next move.

Wiped his face and the hand came away streaked with red. A cut on his cheek? But he’d held his own.

A crowd was gathering.

From out of his adult perspective, there was an unlikely sense of glee. Let’s push it! “You’ve got the numbers and the size,” Josh taunted. “Go ahead. You wanna prove how tough you are? Let’s go.”

A call from the crowd, “Why don’t you pick on somebody your own size?”

Josh took a step forward. They backed off, muttering something about getting him after school.

“After school?” Josh yelled, feeling the momentum.. “What’s wrong with right now? You guys started it. Let’s finish it.” Josh grabbed at a sleeve. The boy shrugged off his hand, embarrassed by the attention.

A teacher was walking towards them. “What’s the problem? Is there a problem?”

The boys were slipping into the crowd. Josh stayed. “No, sir,” he said. “No problem at all. We were playing a game, and a couple of us got tangled and fell.”

The teacher gave him a strange look. “Maybe you better see the nurse for that cut.”

Afterwards, several kids were admiring. Josh enjoyed a warm rush of uncomplicated happiness. Being bullied had been awful. For his older self, it was buried misery. Unearthed and salvaged, it helped him feel here.
After school, Josh picked up his bike, and rode to the distribution point for his paper route. Loaded up newspapers and made his rounds. Now here’s a good use of my time. Twenty bucks a week is a pretty accurate measure of how far my net worth’s declined.

That evening, he had the first extended time with his parents. As his mother threw together a quick, mid-week breast of chicken baked in a Dijon sauce, Josh blessed her culinary skills, at the same time he acknowledged the pretentiousness of a twelve-year-old gourmand.

Sure surprise them if I asked for a glass of Sauvignon Blanc. Come to think of it, that doesn’t sound so good. Has my palette changed? If so, is it psychological or physiological?

Conversation was mostly about the siting of a new elementary school. Uh, oh, I know where this is headed. The final selection would include their lot. Nothing I can do yet.

Suddenly his father was yelling about Josh’s interfering grandmother.

“She doesn’t mean any harm,” his mother countered. His father complained that the chicken was undercooked. She put a hand on his shoulder and he subsided. Watching his parents interact surprised him: the rapid escalation of tension, the implicit sexuality. In later years, they were more at peace.

At least it seemed that way. Maybe I was scared by the power of their emotions, and grateful for the relative calm. It might not have meant that to them at all.

I never understood why he was angry with me so much of the time. Was I such a disappointment? Was it really about my parent’s relationship? I didn’t do such a hot job of figuring out what went wrong with my own marriage. It wouldn’t hurt if I learned more about family dynamics this time around.

When his father lit up a Camel after dinner, Josh had his first family crisis.

I can’t cite the Surgeon General’s Report. I can’t tell him three packs a day is going to make his last ten years miserable with emphysema, then kill him. And most selfishly, I can’t suggest he step outside, because second-ary smoke is dangerous, and it’s a disgusting habit. Oh, wow, there’s going to be years of this!

As soon as practical, Josh excused himself. “English test tomorrow.”

Diagramming a sentence seemed a colossal waste, but he studied hard.

There, that wasn’t so bad.

Moving right along, his social studies homework was about American expansion in the late 19th century. It started Josh thinking about colonialism and nationalism. How little of the early ‘50’s dialog
in the press and government was tuned to those issues. Mostly it was about the communist menace trying to take over the world. Well, it was, but there were some naive reductions occurring.

Perhaps he should begin jotting notes. Not for school, just to play with ideas. That sounded good. Exploring ideas was so much a part of his adult life. The real problem, of course, would be finding a medium to activate them.

_Hmm._

In bed with the lights out, the day caught up. Coming to terms with the rush of constant surprises and connections left him exhausted. Even the ordinary had to be reevaluated and integrated.

There was a thud on the bed, and the family cat joined him, purring into his body. As Josh relaxed, the last question that crossed his mind was, _I wonder if I’ll still be here in the morning?_

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_Spring, 1950_

Dr. Joshua Leyden, courtesy of a Ph.D. from a credible university, went to bed on the verge of the millennium, and awoke midway through the Twentieth Century. Fell asleep focused on the exploitation of child labor, and dreamed of himself as a child, though largely unexploited.

Crashed like a wave over a sea wall, carrying before it the flot and jet of a barely formed character, bursting with youthful excitement at conjuring the seduction of a pig-tailed pixie long buried in the adult’s over-loaded memory bank.

What kept him going, besides inertia and sheer childhood energy, was the knowledge bottled in his head, capped by a twist-off seal, to be released like a Djin at some unspecified date with destiny.

Through his dreams marched ranks of memories, wheeling in constantly shifting formations. The colors of the uniforms were brilliant, the drama of the impending battle urgent and the outcome in doubt.

_He is standing on the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and 17th Street. From the White House, sweeping around the corner, comes the first row of dignitaries. Jacqueline and Robert Kennedy, Charles De Gaulle, Konrad Adenauer, presidents, prime ministers, kings and queens, all marching to honor their fallen President._
A friend turns to him “You could change this you know. That’s why you’ve been sent back.” Other people are turning to him now. “Yes,” they are saying, “you could change this.”

The crowd parts to allow Mrs. Kennedy through. She pulls aside her black veil. “But if you do, I’ll never get to marry Ari. And really, Jack is such a prick. Maybe it would be better if you left well enough alone.”

He is very upset.

So many dreams, so many memories packed into this small vessel. But what could an adult mind do in the body of a twelve-year-old boy?

He knew a great deal about the next half century. Accumulate some capital, and eventually that should convert to a fortune. Josh knew approximately when to buy Polaroid, Xerox, IBM and Microsoft stock before they took off, when and where land values would go ballistic.

Then there were those tantalizing events where interventions might change the course of history.

The basis for the Vietnam War would be setting up once the French were broken at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Hungary and Suez in 1956. Behind them stood deeper issues of human and planetary survival – globalization, population, religious and ethnic divisions, wealth and poverty – issues that were at once spiritual and political.

A street in Fez, Morocco. Admiring the brilliant purples and reds of the newly dyed fabrics hanging in the bazaar. Step behind the facade, and there are workers coughing from the fumes; the waste from dye vats running down the street, poisoning the stream.

Perhaps civilization was already set upon an unsustainable course, and the scale of events and movements beyond any individual to alter. Yet when he allowed himself to dwell among the dead of starvation and war in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia; the children breathing factory fumes in the back alleys of civilization; clear-cut land where forests had flourished – what choice did he have but to keep hold of the passion that had driven him through his adult life?

Did that mean published articles? If so, where and how?

From the political to the personal, he’d had aspirations and some training as a filmmaker. There was a screenplay, which if the timing and money had been right, Josh thought could have been successful. What if I had the money by then?
How about music? What fun to discover Joan Baez, Bob Dylan. All those incredible songs. With a reasonable voice, and a little plagiarism, it might just be possible to convert himself into a wunderkind, pre-folkrock star.

*Just went off the deep end there.*

On a more mundane level, Josh could assess personal and professional choices, and think, *That one I might just skip.*

Contemplating the richness and variety of opportunities, Josh wrote three simple goals in his notebook:

a. Make money.

b. Get published.

c. Change history.

*Well, that’s easy enough. Now all I have to do is do it.*

Josh pounced on the New York Times his father brought home every day, and on weekends began extended visits to the library. He had been interested in current events even at this age, later studied politics and history. Now Josh felt like he was filling in a puzzle.

His world of 1999 was an extrapolation of the very people he read about every day. The present-time world used its experience and imagination, hopes and fears, to make choices. Symposia were doubtless being held even now in the Kremlin and Pentagon; war games played out under the rubric of preserving the peace. Perhaps he wasn’t an absolutely precise tool, but he knew far more than they.

Korea was about to burst on the world’s consciousness, but there was little material available. Did the North invade in June or July? Was their drive stopped in months or weeks?

Shouldn’t there be some kind of warning about Korea?

Ridiculous. If the voices within Defense and State urging preparation were ignored, what could he expect for the ravings of a twelve-year-old?

Far worse to be taken seriously.

*Don’t bother with school, Joshua. You’ll be spending the rest of your life in this nice safe house being debriefed by these nice men.*

No thanks!

Still, the notebook he was beginning to fill created its own pressure. With history about to play out, as a low-risk experiment, Josh worked his precognition into the form of a letter:
To the Editors:

In North Korea, an army is poised to overrun the 38th parallel. The North Koreans are much better armed and trained than advertised and will roll across the border and capture Seoul.

There will be a great frustration in our land that this could happen so soon after the “loss” of China. There will be fear of an inevitable and expanding communist wave.

The U.S. will be forced to intervene.

Protecting allies is a legitimate and central part of our political commitment. Our courageous and well-trained troops will stem the tide.

The temptation, however, will be to label our response as an example of stopping the spread of communist ideology.

Ideology is not what the West has to fear. In spite of communism’s great appeal to the downtrodden and dispossessed, toe-to-toe, trade-to-trade, the ingenuity and vitality of a market economy will bury the manipulations of state socialism.

No, what we have to fear is the release of an angry nationalism, whether Russian, Chinese or Korean, driven by totalitarian regimes. We need to understand they are neither better nor worse than expansionist regimes of the past, driven by colonialist imperatives. Identifying the real forces with which we are struggling will help us meet the challenge of the coming years.

Josh took the train into Manhattan to visit his grandmother. First, he stopped at the heavily trafficked, main Post Office, and set up a P.O. Box under the name of Dennis Machinas. With a return address, he mailed the letter to the New York Times, the Trib, the World Telegram and Sun.

No one printed it. Josh wasn’t sure whether to be annoyed or relieved.

Awake or asleep, the most confusing theme in his life was sex: the preoccupations of an adult mixed with the curiosity of an adolescent whose puberty was upon him like a cat after a mouse. Memories of women he’d known flitted through his dreams. Rather than ministering angels from a heavenly harem, they brought more confusion.
He is in an Amsterdam bar nursing a shot of Old Genever. The atmosphere is a smoky mix of tobacco and marijuana.

On the shelves, among the bottles of liquor, there are ceramic dolls, sitting pretty. The faces seem familiar, yet he can’t quite place them. “Give me one of those dolls,” Josh demands.

“I’m sorry,” the bartender replies. “You must identify them by name.”

There are so many names, so many faces.

A pretty Dutch woman bangs her stein on the dark wood of the counter. She stares him down. “We were to meet at the conference. Now you have gone where I will never find you. Why did you go away?”

Above the bar, in a heavy gilt frame, there is a portrait done in the style of Vermeer. He realizes it is of his ex-wife. She doesn’t look happy either.

Another woman walks into the room, cutting a decisive swathe through the crowd. As she approaches, Allison keeps shifting between the girl he knew at twenty-five, the woman he knew at sixty, and a slender adolescent. She says, “It would never have worked in that world, but I’m a young girl in England now. Won’t you come for me?”

There was a pretty housewife, Mrs. Burnside, on his paper route. A sweet face, framed by dark hair, a discretely presented, but lush bust. Donna Reed, somewhere between eternity and “Leave It To Beaver.”

When he saw her in the driveway unloading groceries, Josh stopped to help. Hung around for the reward of milk and cookies. Her coat off, Mrs. Burnside was wearing a loose halter top. Stretching to reach the cookies on a shelf, there was a breathtaking vista of shaved armpit and flowing breast.

Josh almost fell out of his chair.

He sipped his milk, delighting in the pleasingly plump body as she puttered around the kitchen, oblivious of his lust. Too soon, small talk led out the door, and he was back in the saddle again – his bicycle’s and the only one he would be likely to know for a long time.

The next day in class, Josh was indulging a daydream:

A European film would have the cakes and cookies become increasingly elaborate. If Italian, she stuffs a cannoli in my mouth; if French, a shared éclair leads to further delights; if Swedish, she poisons us both. In America, the most I get is abnormally large tips and a flagrant fantasy life.

What about the real thing?

Libido loose, Josh recalled a pretty divorcee he met while he was
in the Army. *She was twice my age, and that lasted several years.* Josh laughed at himself. Twelve to mid-twenties might be the same ratio as twenty-two to mid-life crisis, but that didn’t mean he could derive an equation.

“Is something amusing you, Joshua?” his teacher interrupted the reverie.

*Just speculating about the seduction of a woman your age, Miss Howard.* “No, M’am,” he answered politely.

As the spring warmed and Mrs. Burnside was more often in the yard, their visits became a daily anticipation.

Although conversation wasn’t exactly “adult,” they settled into an easy exchange about the neighborhood, the weather, and increasingly, reminiscence about her girlhood, usually beginning with, “When I was your age...”

Sally Burnside was South Carolina bred, brought to White Plains in marriage. Her Army Lieutenant took her home when he was demobilized, but here in the Northern suburbs, removed from friends and family, it seemed to Josh she was going somewhat crazy with boredom. Maybe TV would have provided an escape route, but the radio soaps were not doing the trick.

Ridiculous or not, becoming the friend and confident of a lonely, pretty and nice, but not too bright housewife was the most compelling aspect of his life. The fascination was fed by a guileless, slow-motion strip show, as the layers of winter clothing were put aside.

By May, her blouses were snug and her shorts were tight. One day, when she was moving some plants, he helped out, and they both worked up a sweat. Watching drops of moisture make their way from her chin, down her neck, before disappearing into her cleavage, convinced him he was creeping dangerously near obsession.

Creep, indeed, graduating to prowl the neighborhood as the meter reader or driving the Good Humor truck. *Time to fill your tank, lady. Have a Popsicle on me.*

The day she complained about a headache, his offer of a massage came half-way through a story that was driving him to distraction.

She and some boy, down by the Green River. “Billy Joe Ramis, that was his name. Cuter than a button. Couldn’t been much older than you. I was pretty cute myself.”

*I bet you were.*

“Wasn’t the sort of boy my mama and papa approved of, not that I was ready to be dating yet, anyhow. But him and me had been flirting all year in school, and a certain curiosity had developed. You know what I mean.”
You show me yours and I’ll show you mine?

Sally Burnside stopped dead in her story, and appraised him more dubiously. “Maybe you don’t.”

Oh, lady, I could tell you stories that would make your pretty brown hair stand on end. I don’t know where we’re going with this, but I damn sure want to find out. “Yes, I do, Mrs. Burnside. Boys and girls being curious about each other. That’s what you mean.”

In spite of her headache, the woman nodded enthusiastically, then plunged on. “There was this big, old oak tree that reached out over the water. A tire tied to a rope tied to a limb, and with a good push you’d go sailing out and flying with a splash. Oh, my Lord, that was fun.”

“I was practicing being a little bit of a lady, so I allowed how I shouldn’t really. But Billy Joe just said, “Sally Burnside, don’t be afeared, we are going for a ride, together.” And sure enough, he picked me up like he was a man, and I sat in his lap with my arms around him – and don’t you think that felt nice? – while he pushed back far as he could on the shore.”

Oh, yes I think it felt nice. Why the hell aren’t you my age right now?

“I had to hang on for dear life, he was up so high, just touching his toes to the ground. Then he let go and we went flying out over the river. At just the right time, he let go of the rope, and we slid off with the biggest splash you ever saw.”

“I was sputtering, coming up for air, but it wasn’t that deep. We were huggin’ and laughin’. When we came out of the river, our clothes were soakin’ wet. Whatever curiosity we had was pretty obviously satisfied, if you know what I mean.”

“Are you saying…?”

“Oh, no, no, no. Don’t be a silly. I just mean lookin’, and we could see what the Lord provided.” Mrs. Burnside hesitated, “Though I guess, when we got to the shore, we did a little touchin’ just to make sure our eyes had not betrayed us. Oh, he was a cute boy, cute as a button.”

At that point, Josh reached his limit of endurance. Whether he was being innocently titillated or deliberately incited, getting his hands on Sally Burnside was job one.

“Mrs. Burnside, with that headache, would you like a massage?”

“Oh, could you do that for me?”

As his fingers dug into the knotted muscles of her neck and shoulders, the wealth of nations was nothing to the dizzying sensation of molding her flesh. Emboldened by her story, his total focus was on a tune with a woman’s body he had almost forgotten: a thousand memories of the gentle union, the drowsy torpor, the simple pleasures of sensuality, the build of intensity and subtle preparation that could
so easily slide into lovemaking, Josh/Joshua, boy and man, exploring the hollows of neck and shoulders, captivated by the flow of his hands, the dance he was leading or following, which it was, he did not care.

As he kneaded, bizarrely, Josh found himself humming the melody of “Smooth Operator.”

“Mmm. That feels so good. And what a pretty song. It sounds familiar, but I don’t know it.”

Leaning close, his hands slid over her shoulders, thumbs hooking into the open blouse to reach her collarbone. As the blouse peeled away, more skin, and the straps of her bra revealed.

He arched over, staring down her cleavage, her hair brushing his lips, a subtle perfume rising, fingers slipping further, a beat of stunned contemplation, then sliding and surrounding the creamy fullness of her breasts.

There was a split-second of, Time, be my friend, and let me dwell here forever, and, Oh, my God, I’ve done it now, then, almost absent-mindedly, Mrs. Burnside untangled his hands, and led them back to her shoulders.

“Don’t be a silly.”

The next few days, Josh spent endlessly playing back the scene in all its erotic glory. It was easily the most dramatic moment of his return, and he had no idea what, if anything, it meant.

Was seduction, either by her or him, possible? Did Mrs. Burnside’s lack of drama about his coping a monumental feel mean she simply dismissed a pass from her twelve-year old paperboy as absurd, inconsequential or mildly amusing?

Had the connection with stories of her childhood added him to the list of boys she’d tumbled and wrestled with on warm, Carolina nights?

For sure, all his experience was worthless. Unless of course he blew his cover. But what good could that do? Thought about her as Little Red Riding Hood, visiting his wolf in Grandma’s clothing. Even if she believed him, would she like him more, find him an acceptable mate, ditch her husband, etc? More foolishness.

By his next sighting, Josh was in a state of irrational ecstatic expectation, searching for any sign of hope or redemption.

She smiled and he melted. The revived reality of her bust, legs, face trumped rational thought. He waited like a pup to his mistress for the merest pat, a scratch behind the ears, the chance to bury his muzzle in her lap.

All that in a minute or two in the front yard, then somehow back
on his bike, on with his chores. But I could have said so much, looked deeper and longer. Did I miss another chance? Was there ever a chance?

Josh was welcome, but offers of more massages were met with a blank stare, a sweet smile, and the reasonable objection that her headache hadn’t reoccurred.

“Wouldn’t it feel good anyway?” he asked.

Mrs. Burnside reached across the table, patted his hand and smiled some more.

Maybe she wasn’t so dumb, after all. The invitations, visits and conversation were less frequent and more formal. Whatever door that had opened into Sally Burnside’s dollhouse, the little, bad wolf had blown it down, and the game was over.

Living with his parents was emotionally dense and often confusing. Money problems and personal struggles might preoccupy them, but at least they had a life. Evaluated from his adult perspective, they made him nostalgic. They were lovers, they worked, they went out into the world.

His father was struggling to salvage his chemical business. A clever, European engineer, but a mediocre businessman, he had little patience with failure, including his own, and not much with an educational system he perceived as yet another example of American self-indulgence. Josh attempted a low profile, a friendly, supportive affect around the house, and precise, “A” quality schoolwork, but his newly imported confidence was on a collision course. Without revelation of his time-traveling status, avoiding a clash would be a challenge.

As for his mother, she was selling mutual funds, after a life as a reasonably pampered housewife/good cause lady. Her love of reading and a wide-ranging enthusiasm for ideas were gifts he’d cherished.

The best news was that he loved them both, and they were alive and healthy.

Josh kept searching for a way to gracefully introduce his changes. He longed to sit them down at the table, and say, “Folks, I could help a lot.” But presenting the truth would invite a diagnosis of insanity. And even if he could prove his memories, did they need another adult in the house? Josh was part of their life, but as their little boy.

Then the city of White Plains forced his hand.

Walking through the woods, he fords a stream, crossing from rock to stone, coming out on a street. Their house is ahead, but on a small and unfamiliar piece of land, with other homes close on either side.
Two smiling people are waiting at the front door. The smiles fade as their eyes engage with his. A pitchfork in the man’s hand; American Gothic. They are certainly not his parents. He has a sick feeling in his stomach.

“Don’t do it,” Josh said. “Don’t take the money, take the land. Let them move the house.”

His father was attempting to be patient. “We love this house, but it’s stucco. There are no guarantees there won’t be structural damage.”

His parents had been around on this for weeks, since the city announced it would exercise its power of eminent domain to seize land for the new elementary school.

White Plains, in 1950, was yet a town of 50,000, with spreadout neighborhoods, tracts of woods and undeveloped land. A downtown anchored by Macy’s department store, several movie theaters, five and dimes, one high school with a tradition of good academics and great football teams, a county center and the county courthouse. Not as wealthy as neighboring Scarsdale, but on its way to becoming an upscale locus for shopping. Like the rest of Westchester, the population of NYC commuters was already swelling, and the baby boom needed new schools.

Either they accepted the move of their home to a nearby, city-owned plot, or took a cash settlement.

Josh knew what happened: buying another house with too big a mortgage, then having to sell, as part of a downward spiral which left them nothing. On this house, most of their small mortgage was already paid.

Josh also knew that the house traveled fine, and twenty-five years of escalating Westchester prices would put the value at a few hundred thousand dollars. Hold till the top of the market, and his mother (parents, if he could save his father’s health) would have a more comfortable retirement. Of course, by then he’d probably have millions.

“I know the house will be all right.”

“You can’t know,” his mother said.

“Yes, I can.”

It was time to come out of the time closet.

It wasn’t quite that easy. For the first few hours, the gift horse he’d trotted in was received with skepticism and suspicion. If he wasn’t crazy, then somehow their child had been lost.

“No, no, there’s one person with a time-line and memories. Just instead of remembering back, I can also remember forward another fifty years.”
“I’m not saying it doesn’t get complicated emotionally, or when I see us headed towards mistakes – like this house move – I want to um, rectify the situation...”

Although a sketch of future events remained to be proved, sophistication about places he’d traveled, a sudden command of French and a facility for touch-typing helped. Even as his parents grudgingly accepted his changed condition, it was a hell of a shock to learn that your kid was maybe, perhaps, my God, an adult older than you.

Fortunately the scientific implications challenged his father’s imagination, while his mother’s life-long addiction to science fiction eased her transition. She went searching through their library for relevant stories. Josh told her about two TV series, “Sliders” and “Quantum Leap.”

Josh appreciated that in many families, there would have been pressure to turn himself in to the benign and wise authorities. His father had emigrated before the Nazis came to power, but was well aware of the terrible price paid by friends and family. That plus his early work with IG Farben and the international chemical cartel led to a jaundiced view of good will in high places.

“They would eat you for breakfast. America is a wonderful country in many ways, but national governments and corporations have no choice but to act in their self-interest. Like our poison gas factories in Tennessee and Alabama which do not exist, you would be a dirty, little secret. You know too much. Even these writings are a great risk. You must be careful.”

Within a week, the family position on accepting the house move had been reversed. The dialog about cigarette smoking was more problematic. From a theoretical perspective, his father quickly accepted the new information. The links to cancer and emphysema were compelling. The problem was addiction.

For the moment, Josh backed off, angling for a preliminary compromise around the dinner table, and a philosophical commitment to phasing down.

Josh’s standing had changed substantially, yet as their son, and part of the family, there was much to sort out. Each evening, after dinner, he settled down in the living room, and told stories. The broad outline of his life was easily accomplished, but there was so much explanation required along the way.

The glut of information was overwhelming, but they were fascinated by the march of events.
With his parents in the game, suddenly resources were available. Cataloging sports results had not been at the top of Joshua Leyden’s future agenda, but a few stood out.

“The Kentucky Derby is coming up. Everybody knows about the favorites, but Middleground, the horse that wins, is going to be a long shot.”

Soon they were gathered around the dining room table, checking accounts and jotting notes as they totted up the available capital.

“So without second mortgages, or cashing in life insurance policies, maybe five thousand?”

His father nodded. “That’s the way it looks. You’re sure about this?”

As the boy nodded, his mother managed an awe struck whisper, “Eight to one means forty thousand dollars.”

On June 25, the North Koreans crossed the 38th parallel. A few days later, on a Saturday, with school out, Josh stopped by his Manhattan P.O. Box. After months of nothing, a response from a New York Times editorial page staffer:

I thought your letter intriguing enough to pin on my wall, but we don’t print letters without attribution.

Considering your prediction of the swift North Korean capture of Seoul, and U.S. intervention, I’d be interested in future essays on the Korean situation for possible publication in the opinions section of our Editorial page.

I’m prepared to protect your identity, but first you would have to be forthcoming.

Josh was excited. Yet he doubted the editors would be impressed with his stature, either academic or physical. He remained at an impasse.
The “What Does Time Mean to a Pig” story I heard from Dave Gutknecht, a co-op friend from Minneapolis. Many friends have contributed wittingly or not to the tale I’ve told: either by their own stories and example, or by encouragement.

Besides my mate Margaret Flinter’s consistent support and editorial acumen, some of the readers who were particularly helpful were Lisa Kennedy, David Kahn, Bob Abramms and Mona Naimark. My older son, Tim, gave the manuscript a thumbs up, which I thought particularly generous, since my alter ego traveling back in time was likely to wipe any first-time children out of existence. Hazel Henderson provided a quote, after I appeared in her “Ethical Marketplace” television series (on PBS affiliates the spring of ’05).

As for the Big Bang Gang who attended White Plains High School, class of ’55, several of the characters are loosely based on kids I knew. Names have been changed to protect their innocence. I found attending a 50th reunion in the fall of 2005 both instructive and sobering. Kids no longer, they ranged from doddering to impressive to long gone from this mortal coil. Most surprising was the realization of how clueless I was then, in the context of how quickly I connect the dots of character and motivation now. It’s amazing anybody gets anything right the first time around.

Any novel these days that isn’t a pre-sold bestseller is likely to have a torturous publishing history. Several big-time agents gave “Deus ex Machina” a read and turned it down. Along the way, Stephen Morris, then the publisher of a small environmental label in White River Junction, who served with me on the Co-op America Board, liked it but Chelsea Green didn’t do fiction. When he left the company, and decided to launch the Public Press, “Deus ex Machina” was near the top of his choices (right after his own novel, “Stripah Love”). The idea of a more cooperative approach to publishing was appealing to me, and I thought it would be a good match. Michael Potts, who had been with Stephen at Chelsea Green, did a great job translating my text into a printer-ready format, then put up with seemingly endless corrections and improvements.

Pat Wells, who designed the cover, did the same for an earlier book I edited, “A Guide to Cooperative Alternatives,” and is an old friend from our New Haven school cooperative, The Morning Sun. The cover painting and the portrait of me are by my ex-wife, Pomona (Pony) Shea, a wonderful artist and also a good friend. It was done in the early days of our marriage, so perhaps reality suffers from more than a dash of romanticism.
The portrait hangs on the wall of my mother’s cottage in Clearwater, Florida. I was visiting recently on the occasion of her 91st birthday, and my publisher had been harassing me about providing a photograph. I thought the painting would be an interesting alternative. On the opposite wall was a drawing a cousin of mine had done in my early teens. It occurred to me that wasn’t a bad idea either, considering it was for a story about someone whose present suddenly co-exists with his past. While I was taking the photo, I was bothered by a persistent reflection, that as I considered the matter was nothing but serendipitous: Dummy, how much better is you at 60+ looking at yourself at fourteen?

This business of considering time malleable seeps into consciousness in strange ways. The idea that we are at once child and adult; that our life is an open book, not only to be re-read but also re-written, is most intriguing because it’s both true and not-true. Curious beings, we are: time and space are surely one, as around the clock we run.
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